
Perez On The MARCH

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With a year to go before strong-mayor government takes effect in Hartford, Mayor Eddie A. Perez tried the role on for size Thursday, announcing two initiatives aimed at improving life in the city's neighborhoods.

The initiatives, aimed at unsafe drivers and at drug dealers, blighted buildings and other problems in the neighborhoods, reflect a focus on quality-of-life issues that Perez said will dominate the second half of his two-year-term and his campaign for re-election in 2003.

"It's a huge part of what I'm trying to accomplish," he said. "The city can't be viable, downtown can't be viable, unless all of the neighborhoods are viable."

Problems such as litter and traffic violations have not traditionally been on the top of the city's priorities in previous efforts to turn things around, but Perez said bigger problems such as drug-related violence and joblessness are allowed to flourish when the little things go unchecked.

"We are going to hold everyone accountable for upholding a basic standard of living in our neighborhoods," he said. "That goes for the police department, city government and the residents themselves. If you are not being a good neighbor, we are going to let you know about it."

Perez, a moving force behind the drive for the charter reform approved by voters this month, said he believes the sweeping new powers granted to the mayor will make it easier to get things done in the city's neighborhoods.

The new powers will not go into effect until the next mayoral election in about a year, but Perez - who has little official power under the existing charter - was clearly in charge as the new initiatives were announced Thursday.

At a press conference at the corner of Franklin Avenue and Brown Street in the city's South End, Perez said his new "Safe Streets" initiative would use a regional approach to get motorists to slow down and obey the law on city streets.

The mayor said he chose to hold the press conference at the busy intersection, where long lines of backed up motorists honked their horns and gunned their motors through yellow lights, to show the challenges the city faces in making the streets safer. He pointed to a

national survey, released Thursday, that showed that Hartford was the 29th most dangerous city in the country in terms of pedestrian safety.

"When people see a yellow light in West Hartford or Wethersfield or some other suburb of Hartford, they slow down," he said. "For some reason, in Hartford, they speed up or disregard the light altogether. There needs to be a change in attitude."

Hartford Police Chief Bruce P. Marquis said he welcomed the mayor's efforts to improve traffic safety in the city. He said he has assigned Capt. Michael Fallon, head of the department's traffic division, to work with surrounding police agencies to increase enforcement.

Fallon said the operation got started Thursday morning with a checkpoint along the city's border with West Hartford, where officers from both municipalities stopped motorists to check for vehicle safety and other violations. More than 110 infractions were handed out, he said.

"People will be seeing a lot more checkpoints like this over the next several weeks," Fallon said.

The mayor's second initiative involved the revival of a former collaboration with the Chief State's Attorney's Office in which various agencies target problem buildings for a wide range of violations such as drug dealing and health and fire code violations.

The program, called Multi-Agency Response to Community Hotspots, or MARCH, was abandoned two years ago, but Perez said he and acting Chief State's Attorney Christopher Morano recently agreed to bring it back to life after meeting with residents.

"It's a very effective way to show building owners or shop owners that we won't tolerate these violations," said Perez, who attended a MARCH crackdown Thursday at a problem house on Webster Street.

Undercover Hartford police detectives raided the building searching for drug dealers and unauthorized occupants. Then inspectors from the city's building, health and fire departments scoured it looking for code violations.

No drug dealers or squatters were found in the building on Webster Street, but police arrested a man wanted on an outstanding warrant for assault at another house in the North End later in the day.

Also on hand was Brian Austin, a prosecutor in Morano's office who specializes in the state's Nuisance Abatement Act, which gives the state the power to shut down buildings that have been cited for repeat violations.

"The MARCH program gives us another way to attack these problem buildings," Austin said. "If we find the violations are frequent and severe enough, we can use nuisance abatement to shut them down."

The owner of the building on Webster Street, Shah Chowdhury, said he bought it about a year ago and has had tremendous difficulty getting tenants to pay their rent or help maintain the property.

"I'm glad to see these people here," he said as detectives and building inspectors walked over piles of debris in the basement or descended down creaking stairways with broken floorboards.

"It's a pretty long list," said Alvin Estrada, the city housing inspector, who found numerous code violations in the building.

Chowdhury said he would work to rectify the code violations, but encouraged police and city officials to return to help him chase out drug dealers and others who have all but taken over his building.

"I tell some of these people to leave and they laugh at me. One of them even pointed a gun at me," he said.

Police Lt. Harold Even, head of the department's vice and narcotics division, said the property has been a haven for drug dealers for many years.

"We hit it over and over again, and they keep coming back," he said. "Hopefully this kind of action will get their attention."

Next door neighbor Dagmar Medina, who has three children, said she was grateful to see police and other officials targeting the house.

"It's always bad here," she said before inviting Perez to talk to her grandmother, a strong supporter of the mayor. "It's not a good place to raise kids."

The Webster Street property is hardly alone in the problems it poses for the neighborhood. By the end of the day, the MARCH had completed raids at five properties.

As the team moved on from the Webster Street house to target properties in the city's North End, drug dealers could be seen making sales a few blocks away.

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